

THE QANON CONSPIRACY:

Destroying Families, Dividing Communities, Undermining Democracy

PRESENTED BY
RUTGERS
Miller Center for Community
Protection and Resilience

NETWORK CONTAGION RESEARCH INSTITUTE (NCRI)

Alex Goldenberg
Lead Intelligence Analyst,
The Network Contagion Research Institute

Congressman Denver Riggleman

Jason Baumgartner
The Network Contagion Research Institute

Lea Marchl

Alexander Reid-Ross

Joel Finkelstein
Director, The Network Contagion Research Institute
Senior Research Fellow,
Miller Center for Community Protection and
Resilience, Rutgers University

POLARIZATION AND EXTREMISM RESEARCH INNOVATION LAB (PERIL)

Brian Hughes

Caleb Cain

Meili Criezis

Kesa White

Cynthia Miller-Idriss

POWERED BY
**NETWORK
CONTAGION**
RESEARCH INSTITUTE

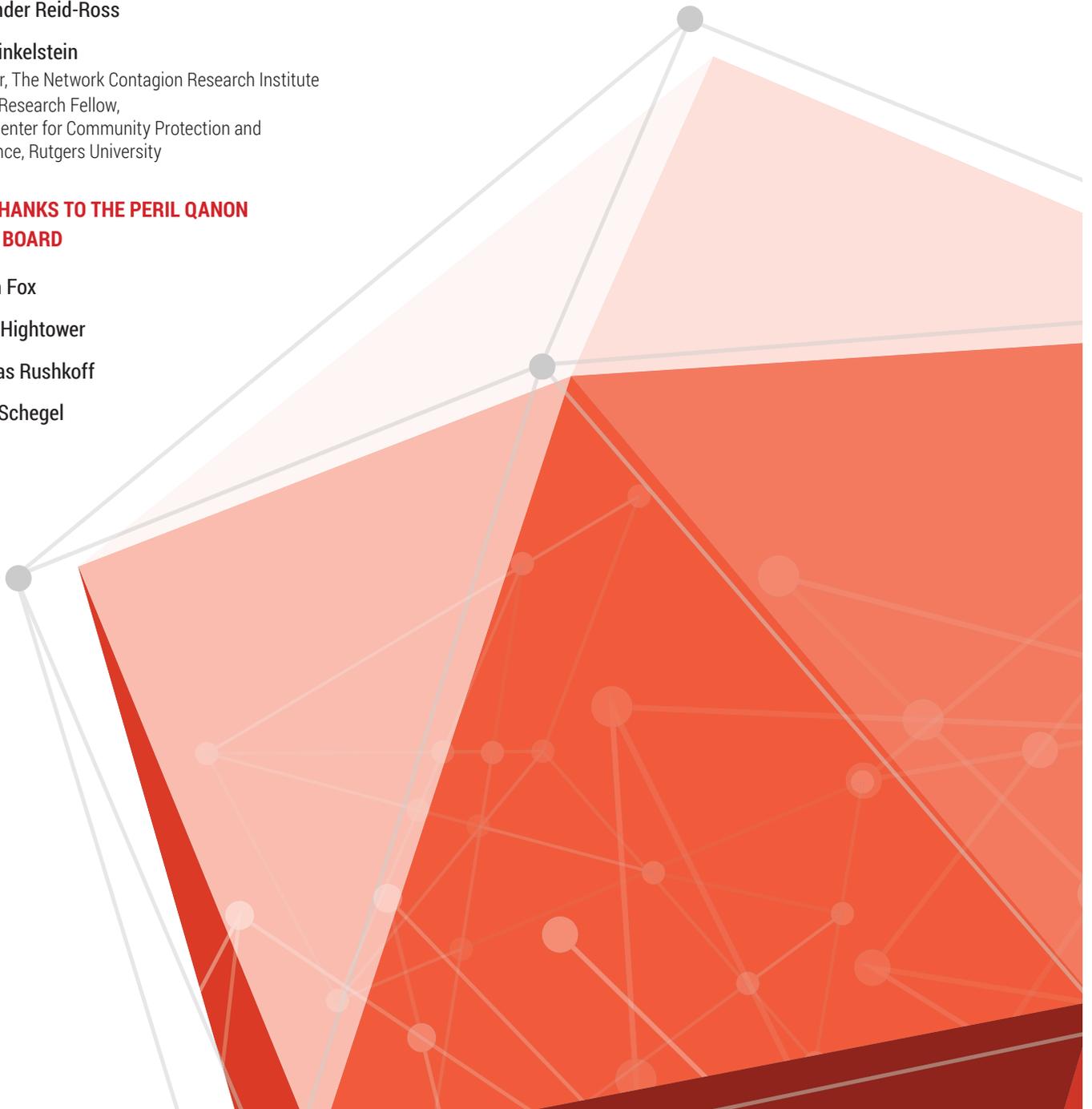
SPECIAL THANKS TO THE PERIL QANON ADVISORY BOARD

Jaclyn Fox

Sarah Hightower

Douglas Rushkoff

Linda Schegel



FOREWORD

"A lie doesn't become truth, wrong doesn't become right, and evil doesn't become good just because it's accepted by the majority."

–Booker T. Washington

As a GOP Congressman, I have been uniquely positioned to experience a tumultuous two years on Capitol Hill. I voted to end the longest government shut down in history, was on the floor during impeachment, read the Mueller Report, governed during the COVID-19 pandemic, officiated a same-sex wedding (first sitting GOP congressman to do so), and eventually became the only Republican Congressman to speak out on the floor against the encroaching and insidious digital virus of conspiracy theories related to QAnon.

Certainly, I can list the various theories that nest under the QAnon banner. Democrats participate in a deep state cabal as Satan worshipping pedophiles and harvesting adrenochrome from children. President-Elect Joe Biden ordered the killing of Seal Team 6. The National Security Agency (NSA) penetrated voting machine software. Venezuelan and Cuban agents inserted malware in Dominion voting system machines. Osama Bin Laden used a body double in Abbottabad. Watermarks identified "real" ballots. Trump attorneys screamed about "More votes than voters" in multiple states. FBI and Justice Department allowed for votes to change from Trump to Biden in the dead of night. "Plandemic" style ideas on weaponized use of COVID-19 forces socialism on U.S. citizens...and so many more bizarre pronouncements and fantasies.

As a former United States Air Force Intelligence Officer and CEO of a company that supported NSA and Office of the Secretary Defense (OSD) programs in cyber defense, network analysis, algorithmic warfare and critical infrastructure holistic modeling, I am uniquely qualified to argue and dismiss conspiracy theories. But, what I found is that the technical repudiation of many of these theories doesn't matter to those who believe with heart and soul in a massive deep state cabal against President Trump. My concerns have turned from the technical and analytical case against conspiracy theories to the damage being done to family relationships and friendships based on a multi-pronged digital radicalization using far-fetched, artificial and unsubstantiated assertions to reinforce QAnon and similar conspiracies.

Below is only one example of messages sent to me either via text, e-mail, tweet or Facebook Messenger. Please read in its entirety. I did not change syntax or grammar.

"Trump has a plan and watch it play out. He asked for a recount which they will fight. He had the real ballots marked before hand with a secret water mark; the forged ballots do not have this. [From Evelyn – only 12 toss up States got the watermark. Special ink is only observable with UV light or military night vision goggles]. So in the recount they will sort out the real ones from the fake ones. Trump was prepared. He knew Biden was in China's pocket. His NSA told him what was going on at the Houston Chinese Consulate that is why he ordered it closed 6 months ago and there were reports of them burning papers in the yard when he announced the closure. That is here they were storing the forged ballots to turn Texas blue on election day. What better place to store fake ballots then at a foreign consulate where you can not get a warrant to search because of diplomatic immunity. Because of closing this consulate Texas remained Red. So the intelligence agencies have been doing their jobs behind the scenes. So do not worry – we already won; we are watching a movie play out. That is why Trump always says grab the popcorn and enjoy the show. #WATERMARK #TheDemsFellIntoTheTrap."

This type of thinking is not unique to this one individual. Pat's (not the person's real name) message seems incoherent, technically improbable and, in some sense, crazy. But, the distinctive language and ideas in this conspiratorial screed identify Pat as a true believer in QAnon concepts propagating across the multiple digital highways on the internet. The concepts stated are metastasizing in the United States and overseas. Families and friendships are being torn apart by ideas and theories pushed over social media by disreputable sources and even some larger media outlets. I have not been immune to the fallout. My outspoken position against QAnon and like conspiracy theories has already caused the loss of dear friendships and an incredible strain with some family members. If I were to share the texts or related phone conversations I've had with people close to me, it would sadden and frighten those who might want to speak out against QAnon drivel. Summarizing the messages can best be summed up as "traitor," "Soros-backer," "pedophile," "liar," "deep state stooge," "member of the ZOG," "RINO"—and the very worst of all—"not on the Trump team!"

When ideas or fantasy are weaponized, there is a metamorphosis from harmless, bizarre theories to a dangerous bloom of tribalism and dehumanization of others. This bloom expands digitally from person to person, absorbing and then converting a tribe that believes alternate realities based on a directed stream of algorithmically and group targeted data, ignorant analytic white papers, memes, ideas and coded language. When people, like myself, reject ideas pushed by the tribe, they are ostracized and ridiculed. Suddenly, one finds themselves "tribe-less". For some, this is a disconcerting and fearful state. For me, it's exactly why I chose to serve this great country in the military and as a Congressman. It's why I took multiple oaths to the Constitution. I would rather be outside a tribe than to kowtow to ridiculousness. My tribe is not a political party, a Facebook group, or a church.

Our Constitution spells out our natural rights to free speech, freedom of assembly, and freedom to worship as we choose. I am the first person to support anyone who thinks worshipping a head of lettuce leads to enlightenment. I am also the first person to reject a person or group who demands that everyone believes in the lettuce enlightenment ideal and that non-belief is subject to punishment and repudiation. Demanding the worshipping of lettuce leads to lettuce worship becoming a cult.

Continuing to present facts is the ultimate objective of the Network Contagion Research Institute (NCRI). It must be done with the highest of standards, ensuring that those who search for facts never diminish or politicize the effort. It's the highest honor serve the people of my congressional district and to always strive to be someone who will not propagandize for a vote or a position. This report, by NCRI, in partnership with the Polarization and Extremism Research and Innovation Lab (PERIL) research team at American University, is an attempt to identify facts and truth for those who want to know. Conversely, NCRI's data and research can be utilized by those intrepid individuals who wish to engage with family and friends, or people like Pat above, who believe or are on the cusp of accepting theories like QAnon. It's never an easy road to push loved ones. I know by experience. Our sincerest hope is that this report helps in some way to shed light on conspiracies and how they spread.

—Congressman Denver Riggleman

INTRODUCTION (FRAMING)

The authors of this report collaborated on a rapid assessment and analysis of QAnon because of our growing concern about the threat it poses to the nation. This threat can be divided into three key categories: creating and amplifying cultural and political divisions, introducing and spreading disinformation and anti-Jewish conspiracy theories, and mobilizing and motivating extreme and lethal violence.

The QAnon-conspiracy has grown exponentially, ensnaring ever-more individuals in a cult-like set of beliefs that destroys families, divides communities and has even sparked incidents of fatal violence. QAnon adherents are left completely divorced from reality, sometimes described by friends and family as “lost” to QAnon. The QAnon-conspiracy cult’s gamified ecosystem—which attracts people with psychological rewards for solving hidden ‘clues’—is spinning out of control.

We proceed with significant concern and caution about how this report will be interpreted and used. The QAnon movement only benefits from division and conflict. Challenges to its conspiratorial worldview are met with extreme resistance and/or hostility. This report must not be used to sow division, either culturally or politically. Environments with these conditions are exactly where conspiracies, cults, and extremist movements thrive.

Finally, as a result of the rapid and preliminary nature of this research, there are important gaps to note. The urgency of this report has precluded a full qualitative and quantitative analysis of the narrative tropes and rhetoric common to QAnon culture. It relies instead on a combined body of scholarship, representing the work of over a dozen scholars, journalists, and researchers specializing in cults, extremism, and QAnon itself. It is hoped that this report might inspire methodologically rigorous research into the nature of QAnon culture, decisive policy responses, and intervention work on how to prevent its corrosive influence in our communities and our politics.

NARRATIVE THEMES, TROPES, AND RHETORICAL STRATEGIES

The following descriptive sections are intended to provide readers with an outline of QAnon, its mythologies, social practices, and real-world consequences. A team of more than a dozen experts have collaborated to share their findings and analysis into what were determined these essential takeaway points. It must be stressed that this represents a synthesis of ongoing research, rather than the findings of a purposive study. Selected footnotes are offered for further reading.

History

QAnon is a conspiracy theory and subculture, based online but spilling over into the “real world.” It dates back to October 2017, when an anonymous author named “**Q Clearance Patriot**” began posting cryptic messages on the 4chan message board.¹ These posts were puzzled over and interpreted by board users and soon by people on other internet platforms as well. Q Clearance Patriot’s (or simply “Q’s”) riddles are colloquially referred to as “**Q drops**” or “**bread crumbs**,” and QAnon followers (or “QAnons”) who seek to make meaning from them are sometimes called “**bakers**.”^{2,3}

A core theme soon emerged, which remains central to all QAnon mythology: that the world is secretly controlled by a Satan-worshipping cabal of pedophile elites who practice human child sacrifice. From this core, countless strains and tendencies emerge. For many QAnons in the U.S., this cabal is led by well-known politicians, business leaders and entertainment figures. It is opposed by a “white hat” movement of heroes, ordained by God and including Q himself, who work within elite institutions to battle the cabal (Q is generally assumed by believers to be a U.S. intelligence agent). Someday soon, Q predicts, “The Storm” will arrive. This term refers to the day when this cabal is publicly outed, arrested, and executed. This belief in the satanic cryptocracy and its preordained exposure and destruction is the defining trait of the QAnon-conspiracy culture. Absent this core, a conspiracy cannot properly be categorized as belonging to QAnon, though many conspiracies are nonetheless compatible with QAnon and may have certain overlapping elements.

Several proto-QAnon phenomena preceded Q’s October 2017 emergence, such as **FBIAnon**, **CIAAnon**, and **Pizzagate**. Many elements of QAnon can be seen in the Pizzagate imbroglio, a conspiracy theory and series of crimes that grew out of the 2016 election. Beginning with Russian-hacked emails from the Hillary Clinton campaign, online influencers promulgated a theory that high-ranking Democratic politicians and staff were involved in human trafficking and child sacrifice in the non-existent basement of a suburban Washington, D.C. pizzeria. These conspiracies inspired threats against the pizzeria, its owners and patrons, one attempted arson,⁴ and one active shooter incident,⁵ in which a gunman took the restaurant hostage. Similarly lurid mythology and violent outbursts have since come to define QAnon,⁶ which has inspired at least

1 Simon Wiesenthal Center, “QAnon: From Fringe Conspiracy to Mainstream Politics.” September 2020. <https://www.wiesenthal.com/assets/qanon-from-fringe-conspiracy.pdf>.

2 WSJ Staff, “What is QAnon?” The Wall Street Journal. October 15, 2020. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/what-is-qanon-what-we-know-about-the-conspiracy-theory-11597694801>.

3 Partin, William Clyde, & Marwick, Alice Emily. “The Construction of Alternative Faces: Dark Participation and Knowledge Production in the QAnon Conspiracy,” AoIR Selected Papers of Internet Research, 2020. <https://journals.uic.edu/ojs/index.php/spir/article/view/11302>.

4 Hermann, Peter. “Man pleads guilty to setting fire at Comet Ping Pong pizza restaurant in DC,” The Washington Post. December 17, 2019. https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/public-safety/man-pleads-guilty-to-setting-fire-at-comet-ping-pong-pizza-restaurant-in-dc/2019/12/17/058f7abe-2111-11ea-86f3-3b5019d451db_story.html.

5 LaFrance, Adrienne. “The Prophecies of Q,” The Atlantic. June 2020. <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2020/06/qanon-nothing-can-stop-what-is-coming/610567>.

6 Becket, Lois. “QAnon: A timeline of violence linked to the conspiracy.” The Guardian. October 16, 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/oct/15/qanon-violence-crimes-timeline>.

one shooting, one sword murder,⁷ one hostage situation at the Hoover Dam, and numerous child abductions (“rescues”) by QAnon believers.

Many QAnon experts agree that the cultural, technological, and political conditions of the late 2010s were ripe for a phenomenon such as QAnon. The political culture had been polarizing for some time, exacerbated by the rise of social media, and its tendency to create echo chambers and ideological filter bubbles. The 2008 economic crisis threw many Americans’ lives into disarray and uncertainty, rendering them more vulnerable to the easy answers, ready enemies, and sense of power and purpose offered by a movement like QAnon. Simply put, by the late 2010s, many people were scared, confused, disrupted, and angry, and looking for explanations, a scapegoat—and, crucially, hope and a path toward meaningful action.

QAnon was one of several conspiracy theories circulating at the time, yet it was the one that stuck. QAnon’s scope, popularity, and the speed with which it spread are unique in the history of conspiracy theories and cultist milieus. Today, the QAnon movement is active in at least 71 countries.

QAnon, like other conspiracy theories/extremist movements, is motivated by a sense of existential threat.⁸ This urgency is what evokes the passion with which ordinary people fall prey to its fantasies. This is what motivates and justifies the ruined friendships, alienated families, and the toxic cultural atmosphere that follows QAnon wherever it may be found.

Key Themes, Narratives, and Rhetoric

QAnons exhibit a range of belief and involvement in the movement and its mythology. Some are fully dedicated to Q’s most lurid supernatural dimensions, while others are merely driven by a vague concern over issues such as child exploitation or the “military-industrial complex.” Anecdotally, many casual QAnons report a strong emotional pressure to spread awareness over child exploitation and human trafficking, even if they find Q’s conspiratorial claims dubious at best.

QAnon can gather such a diverse array of individuals with such varying levels of commitment thanks to the way it seduces people into its worldview. QAnon offers an ironclad narrative (the core belief in a satanic, human trafficking, “deep state,” and the imminent storm), but simultaneously encourages its audience to reach that conclusion via their own research. “Do your own research” and “Think for yourself” are key to the culture of QAnon research (“baking”). When an Anon does so, they will share their findings on 8kun, in a Facebook group, on Twitter, or in some other Q-friendly space. Here, their participation and ingenuity are rewarded in the form of community accolades and recognition.⁹

If a “trail of breadcrumbs” (i.e. a conspiracy narrative that reaches the basic preordained conclusion) is sufficiently compelling, it will reach the attention of key influencers and perhaps Q themselves. Even if a narrative fails to catch on, it is rarely met with the hostility or disdain so common in online spaces. As a social milieu, QAnon is extremely welcoming and friendly to insiders and violently hostile to outsiders. These strong in-group and out-group dynamics are responsible for the wake of ruined family relationships, friendships, and community bonds left in the wake of QAnon’s spread.

7 ADL. Report: Murder and Extremism in the United States in 2019. <https://www.adl.org/murder-and-extremism-2019>.

8 Pugliese, Matteo. “J.M. Berger on Extremism.” European Eye on Radicalization. November 14, 2018. <https://eeradicalization.com/j-m-berger-on-extremism>.

9 Warzel, Charlie. “Is QAnon the Most Dangerous Conspiracy Theory of the 21st Century?” The New York Times. August 4, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/04/opinion/qanon-conspiracy-theory-arg.html>.

QAnon offers a “big tent” that can contain many tendencies. For this reason, QAnon is highly adaptable to cultural context. QAnons outside of the U.S. focus less on American politicians and celebrities, and more on core issues such as human trafficking. Whereas American Anons might focus on child trafficking conspiracies within the Democratic party or Hollywood, British Anons might focus on the Royal Family and aristocracy. In contrast, German Anons focus on anti-vaccination conspiracies as the expression of their concern for children and paranoia toward “elites” via the medical establishment.

This style of “do it yourself” theorizing is particularly effective for incorporating elements of true stories to support its lurid conspiracies. The cases of Jeffrey Epstein and Jimmy Saville, for example, demonstrate that elite pedophile rings do exist, and that they do sometimes enjoy protection from powerful political and cultural figures. Growing economic inequality lends credence to the sense that the world is fast dividing into an unaccountable elite and a precarious middle class. When our leaders and institutions fail to address these problems, conspiracy cultures like QAnon step in to provide relief from a pervasive sense of powerlessness.

Once ensconced in its social milieu—and having adopted some degree of commitment to the existential threat at the core of QAnon mythology—it becomes imperative that adherents take action. Most often, this action comes in the form of evangelizing. Anons will post, re-post, comment, and like the content produced by themselves and key QAnon influencers. They introduce QAnon themes into discussions of other trending topics sometimes via hashtag hijacking, into their personal correspondence on social media, and in real life. It must be emphasized that this is not done cynically by the rank-and-file. The sense of existential threat posed by belief in a satanic deep state and the emotional/moral imperative to save children compels people to do so out of a sincere sense of moral responsibility. In this way, QAnon hijacks ordinary people’s basic decency to spread lies and calls for violence against innocent groups and individuals. Occasionally, when this imperative meets an unbalanced or violent individual, dangerous criminal activity is the outcome.

International Dissemination

As mentioned earlier, QAnon operates more as a syncretic cult—a millenarian movement consolidated around the cryptic utterances of a prophetic leader—than a specific conspiracy theory, so it is highly adaptive. Though it originates today in 8kun, QAnon followers operationalize a mix of bots and influencers on social media platforms like Twitter and Instagram. At the same time, the encrypted Telegram app increasingly offers a direct means for members of the QAnon community to foster shared ideas and purpose around prominent individuals, facilitating broad international networks from Brazil to Germany and elsewhere.

In Brazil, political circles around the far right use QAnon tropes with increasing frequency. Fact-checking agency Aos Fatos found 212 Brazilian authorities following a total of 1,400 Twitter accounts responsible for the spread of QAnon—16% of these are more hardcore supporters who follow at least ten accounts.¹⁰ Some promote movement tropes without openly supporting QAnon. Yet this is likely only scratching the surface of its real spread. As one politician named Diego Henrique de Sousa Guedes posted to Twitter in July 2019, “My QAnon guys are all on Gab, Reddit, 4chan, 8chan... I don’t dare talk about it so much here because we, more than ever, need to have Twitter active in Brazil.”¹¹

¹⁰ Fávero, Bruno, João Barbosa, Marina Gama Cubas. Políticos brasileiros seguem mais de 1.400 contas que divulgaram teorias da conspiração ‘QAnon’ no Twitter. Radar Aos Fatos, April 9, 2020.

¹¹ See Coehlo, Leonardo, “QAnon: quatro candidatos a vereador mostram como conspiração invadiu estas eleições municipais,” The Intercept Brasil, October 7, 2020, <https://theintercept.com/2020/10/07/qanon-quatro-candidatos-a-vereador-mostram-como-conspiracao-invadiu-estas-eleicoes-municipais>.

Like in the U.S., QAnon themes such as the “deep state” globalists engaging in child sacrifice spread through the use of hashtags and suggestive social media posts, as well as ostensibly anti-pedophilia protests that serve as fronts for QAnon activism. When politicians are confronted with their engagement with the movement, they often demur from open affiliation but continue to spread the hashtags and memes. Even Bolsonaro’s son, Eduardo, has gestured to the movement, predicting “a storm coming.”¹²

Across the Atlantic, Germany acts as a major QAnon hub. Conspiracy theories about underground bunkers, aliens, and mind-control microchips already proliferated in the far right through 4chan’s sister site, Kohlchan and other sites. However, the COVID-19 pandemic and ensuing restrictions provided the impetus for a widespread illiberal resistance movement tied to the populist radical right party, Alternative for Germany. Older conspiracy-theory movements like the Reichsburgers who believe that the U.S. must sign a peace treaty with Germany at the U.S. embassy have been braided together with newer groups like the Corona Rebels through mass anti-mask demonstrations promoted in Russian media and some alternative media, mobilizing tens of thousands of violent, far-right rioters from Leipzig to Frankfurt to Berlin.

From Brazil to Germany to everywhere else the QAnon movement spreads, mobilized far-right actors look to the U.S. for guidance and support. Most recently, German QAnon supporters have targeted Dominion as a central player in efforts to rig the U.S. election in order to spread vaccines that may carry nanochip receivers that intercept mind-control transmissions from 5G towers. The U.S. under the current administration is viewed by QAnon supporters as the leader both in the generation of QAnon and in the secret war against a deep state cabal. As one German ultra-right conspiracy theorist declared, “Only the Americans can help us now.”¹³

¹² @EduardoBolsonaroApoio, Parler, September 2020.

¹³ Ross, Alexander Reid, “German QAnon Groups Now Claim Trump’s Election Boogeyman Is Behind Coronavirus Tests,” The Daily Beast, November 19, 2020, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/german-qanon-groups-now-claim-trumps-election-boogeyman-is-behind-coronavirus-tests>.

WHY QANON IS DESTRUCTIVE

The QAnon movement is not merely an assortment of eccentrics, nor is it a tolerable fringe sect whose harmless beliefs, while divorced from reality, pose no threat to society. QAnon is a destructive force in our families, communities, and to our democracy. Allowing it to infiltrate the American political grassroots and/or gain a foothold in our political parties poses an intolerable risk to the stability of our communities and the health of our republic.

The End-Goal of QAnon is Violent Elimination of its Political Opponents

As stated earlier, QAnon has two core beliefs: that the world is ruled by a cabal of satanic pedophiles and that a cleansing “storm” will soon expose this cabal, whose members will then be imprisoned or executed. And indeed, to combat the ultimate evil, the ends will justify the means. QAnon accuses specific individuals of membership in this group, including everyone from former President Barack Obama to actor Tom Hanks. Of course, the revelations promised in the “storm” will never come, because these conspiracy theories are self-contradictory fantasies. The violence of the storm, however, might be all too real. QAnon followers have already committed several murders and many kidnappings in the three short years of the cult’s existence.^{14 15 16} Its ultimate goal is the death of innocent people whom it delusionally claims are in league with the devil.

QAnon Erodes our Democracy

A handful of activists and politicians have embraced QAnon—some are misguided but sincere while others are deeply cynical. When political participation is motivated by this nightmarish fantasy of supernatural conspiracy, effective governance is impossible. A political system in which QAnon plays an active role can no more govern effectively than one in which believes that witches cause hurricanes. Our ability to debate policy in the public square becomes impossible. Politicians and parties that seek to exploit QAnon will ultimately reap the whirlwind themselves through an unpredictable and irrational constituency lost in their own dark fantasies.

QAnon Tears Families Apart

As QAnon followers wander further down rabbit holes of dark fantasy, they inevitably come into conflict with their family, friends, and broader community. People outside of the QAnon movement are naturally disturbed by the movement’s nightmarish mythology and stated desire for political violence. When they attempt to disagree, they are often met with hostility. In a movement where lines between in-group and out-group are so clearly drawn, disbelief in core myths are perceived as threats. When families cannot bridge this gap of unreality, they often become estranged. Sometimes, family members who reject QAnon are even seen as part of the conspiracy.

14 Amarsingam, Amarnath. “The QAnon Conspiracy Theory: A Security Threat in the Making?” The CTC Sentinel. <https://ctc.usma.edu/the-qanon-conspiracy-theory-a-security-threat-in-the-making>.

15 Sommer, Will. “QAnon Promotes Pedo-Ring Conspiracy Theories. Now They’re Stealing Kids.” The Daily Beast. August 16, 2020. <https://www.thedailybeast.com/qanon-promotes-pedo-ring-conspiracy-theories-now-theyre-stealing-kids>.

16 Greenspan, Rachel E. “QAnon conspiracy theorists have been linked to 12 alleged crimes. Here are the incidents said to be connected to the movement and its followers.” Insider. November 11, 2020. <https://www.insider.com/qanon-violence-crime-conspiracy-theory-us-allegation-arrest-killing-gun-2020-8>.

QAnon Is Implicitly Anti-Jewish

Whereas many conspiracy cultures have historically not evangelized, and many cults have not incorporated end-times eschatology, QAnon conspicuously includes both. This, combined with its structural similarity to The Protocols of the Elders of Zion, and its origins in online spaces replete with anti-Jewish propaganda, should raise serious concerns about the latent antisemitism present in QAnon. Themes derivative of Christian Identity (an antisemitic cult tied to neo-Nazi groups and the militia movement) are already present in QAnon culture. It does not seem far-fetched that the eliminationist crusade described above could easily be turned to target Jews.

QAnon Impedes Basic Social Functions

QAnon's paranoid, distorted view of reality creates serious obstacles to a functioning society. The QAnon movement spreads anti-vaccine conspiracy theories at a time when vaccination against COVID-19 is critical to saving lives and restoring the health of our economy. It spreads conspiracy theories that seek to discredit voting itself, undermining trust in our core democratic process while hinting at the need for violence against both Democrats and Republicans who worked to ensure the validity of the 2020 election. When the most basic needs of public health and democratic governance are under attack in this way, our entire society suffers.

WHY QANON IS SPREADING

QAnon's rapid spread, and the passionate support demonstrated by its believers, may be attributed to several factors:

Gamification

QAnon bears many of the hallmarks of an augmented reality game (ARG). That is, a "real life" role playing game which integrates current events, public personalities, and players' own lives. While QAnon never explicitly describes itself in this manner, it is precisely that disavowal that enables players/believers to become lost in the fantasy of the game.

Some key features that QAnon shares with the best ARGs include:

- **Epic meaning:** As described above, the QAnon narrative pits followers in a fight against ultimate evil—a pedophilic, satanic "deep state." They are guided by a mysterious leader who possesses ultimate truth. And while they start from a position of weakness (the cabal is in control), they know they will ultimately triumph. One may see easy parallels between epic fantasy stories such as *Star Wars* and *The Lord of the Rings*. QAnon permits its believers to lose themselves in a fantasy of similar scope and significance.
- **Empowerment:** QAnon offers believers an opportunity for active participation. Its story is written from the bottom-up just as much as it originates in Q's cryptic posts. This helps to place believers in the role of the hero as they "do their own research" and "follow breadcrumbs" to discover the (preordained) truth. By posting and spreading the word, they are fighting the satanic deep state in an infowar, saving children with every social media post or retweet.
- **"Yes, and...":** QAnon lore demonstrates the inclusive, aggregative style of improvisational theater (which ARGs often use). Participants are expected to add to one another's theories rather than contradict them. This enables divergent and contradictory theories to exist side by side, under the expectation that The Storm will resolve all such contradictions. This further reinforces QAnon's cohesive in-group cultural style, while it diverts attempts to point out logical inconsistencies, and allows for individual creativity on the part of the "player"/Anon.
- **Recognition:** Throughout this process of collaborative, aggregative storytelling, participants are socially rewarded. The reward mechanisms engineered into social media provide actual dopamine surges when users receive likes and retweets from their peers and influencers.
- **Social influence:** Participation in the QAnon ARG provides a shared, insulated reality. This, in turn, generates feelings of community and shared identity. That shared sense of virtual community can come to supersede the real bonds of family and friends, which tend to be messier and more complicated. As social influence from within the QAnon community grows, real-life social ties may deteriorate.
- **Ownership:** The QAnon rank-and-file feels a sense of ownership over the conspiracy narrative, due to their role co-writing it. QAnon does not deliver a dogma so much as it urges its followers to uncover one. Since no one knows exactly who Q is, there is a strong sense of equality in interpreting his words.

- **Unpredictability:** Because QAnon mythology is false, aggregative, and self-contradictory, it offers participants a constant process of discovery. The narrative adapts to fit events in real life, just as these events are distorted to fit the QAnon narrative. Predictions and prophecies are constantly revisited and reinterpreted so as not to be proven wrong by actual real-world events. And so, there are always new “rabbit holes” to go down, new “bread crumb trails” to pursue, new nightmarish plots to uncover, and new prophecies for eventual justice and revelation

This raises an ominous question: if QAnon is a game, what is the reward at its conclusion? What is the player’s ultimate goal? What does QAnon want? The answer to this question is troubling, as it seems that QAnon, as guided by Q and scene influencers, ultimately seeks the humiliation, imprisonment, and even execution of its perceived cultural and political enemies, whom it dehumanizes as in league with the devil. These features share much in common with cults and extremist milieus, which will now be discussed.

Cults and Extremist Milieus

Many of the motivating (“push”) factors that drive individuals to the QAnon milieu are similar to those that create vulnerabilities to cults and extremism. Social and emotional turmoil can create desperate needs for stability and belonging,¹⁷ which the QAnon culture promises to satisfy. Sometimes, friends and family members even opt to join the QAnon movement rather than face the ongoing friction and estrangements that can come from disagreeing with a committed follower. QAnon displays many of the communication strategies found in traditional extremist movements, such as recruitment of celebrity spokespeople and the phenomenon of “ideological outbidding,” where increasingly extreme viewpoints are rewarded for demonstrating greater commitment to the cause.

- **Social dislocation and emotional turmoil:** Traumatic life changes and societal disorder both create vulnerabilities for recruitment to extremism and cults. When people lose their ordinary social support networks, the stability offered by steady employment, or the fabric of their community is damaged by drugs, crime, or economic hardship, they might turn to cults and extremism for support, certainty, and ready scapegoats. Today, the scope of these dislocating forces is vast. It includes the pressures of globalization and demographic change, precarious employment, the securitization of parenthood, the opioid epidemic, the 2008 economic crash, climate change, crumbling infrastructure...the list goes on. The COVID-19 pandemic and its attendant social isolation and uncertainty has created a perfect storm, as people spend more time than ever online in search of answers and human connection. Cults and extremist groups offer easy answers, a sense of community, and enemies to blame. In times such as these, those promises are extremely seductive.
- **“Advertising towers”:** Cults will often elevate celebrities and influencers to the status of heroes as a means of marketing themselves. In this respect, QAnon is no different. High-profile believers will see their communications boosted across social media. Oftentimes, they will be woven into the group’s lore, cast in starring roles in QAnon fantasies of battling the “Deep State.” These celebrities in turn lend visibility and credibility to the cult. QAnon advertising towers include a range of celebrities, from “mommy bloggers” to reality TV stars, athletes, Hollywood actors, and even some politicians.

¹⁷ McCauley, Clark & Moskalenko, Sophia. “Mechanisms of Political Radicalization.” *Terrorism and Political Violence*. 2008. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/09546550802073367>.

- **Lovebombing:** While QAnon is extremely hostile, and even occasionally violent, to outsiders, it is extremely warm and welcoming to believers. Newcomers are showered with affirmation and encouragement. Unlike other political and extremist milieus, where infighting is rampant, the collaborative, “yes, and...” style of QAnon mythologizing smooths over many disagreements. Anons’ belief in their shared fight against ultimate evil, and its preordained victory, fosters an extreme “esprit de corps” characterized by emotional support, positive reinforcement, and mutual concern.
- **Cultist lore:** Many cults demonstrate the same features as augmented reality games. QAnon, like ARGs and cults such as Japan’s Aum Shinrikyo or the Manson Family (both responsible for mass murders), engages in participatory myth-making. Every member of the QAnon culture is encouraged to “bake bread,” or connect clues from Q drops to current events and pre-existing Q lore. Canon is established by consensus, albeit with key influencers and Q themselves holding final undeclared authority to deem interpretations valid or invalid.
- **Ideological “outbidding”:** In closed ideological spaces like QAnon, belief has a natural tendency to drift toward greater extremity. When agreement is rewarded and disagreement punished, it is common for members to express more and more hardline attitudes, as a means of receiving social reward and demonstrating commitment to the group. For example, an Anon expressing belief that certain politicians are actually demons is less likely to receive pushback than one expressing doubt that they are pedophiles. This creates a dangerous situation, as discourse naturally drifts closer to the extremes and the possibility of violence.

Attributes of Online Communication

- **Growth related to the pandemic:** The COVID-19 pandemic has forced people to spend more time than ever online. With the boredom and depression of social distancing and lockdown, people are seeking out new spaces, places, and ideas online. QAnon influencers know this, and have ramped up their outreach efforts. Combined, these factors create a “network effect,” in which QAnon’s reach and its rate of conversion increase exponentially as the movement grows.
- **Alt-tech:** Digital platforms are in a catch-22. If they do nothing to combat the spread of QAnon, they are enabling a damaging and potentially dangerous movement to evangelize new recruits. However, by banning QAnon, platforms risk sending its believers to “alt-tech” platforms, clones of popular social media sites with less-strict rules. On alt-tech platforms such as Gab, Parler, Voat, Telegram, and Bitchute, Anons are immersed in even smaller and more self-contained echo chambers, where the risk of radicalization to even more outlandish beliefs and antisocial practices is far greater.
- **Digital rhetoric:** Storytelling and argumentation operate differently online than in the spoken or printed word. In print, illogical arguments stand out more prominently. In speech, paranoid and emotionally unstable individuals are more easily recognized through their tone and physical affect. However, online, it is more difficult to distinguish marginal personality types from healthy ones. And arguments are often supported not through explanation, but simply by providing a hyperlink to an argument someone else has already made. Unfortunately, many people will not follow the link and soberly assess its claims. Instead, they take the mere provision of the link as adequate support for an argument. It is thus much easier for illogical, outlandish, or simply false statements to slip through the cracks.

- **Hashtag hijacking:** Hashtags enable social media users to participate in conversations with strangers relating to many issues, both important and frivolous. QAnons often search out these conversations to inject them with QAnon talking points, either steering conversation to Q mythology or by juxtaposing QAnon-specific hashtags (e.g. #WWG1WGA) with general interest hashtags (e.g. #Election2020). This gives QAnon the ability to piggyback on other popular social, political, and cultural movements and scenes.
- **Crowdsourced mythology:** Because QAnon produces its mythology in collaboration between ordinary believers, its influencers, and Q themselves, the movement is able to harness the wisdom of crowds to ensure compelling narratives. The online QAnon community acts as its own ongoing focus group, testing different narratives, conspiracies, and interpretations and informally measuring their relative popularity via likes, retweets, comments, and the ability of others to build off them. The most compelling “storylines” naturally rise to the top and acquire the status of QAnon canon.
- **Hybrid structure:** The evolution and spread of Q narratives are neither entirely orchestrated, nor entirely organic. Key influencers—some sincere and some cynical—push content, which is then latched onto and amplified by less popular influencers and the vast “middle” of the QAnon rank-and-file. Content can be produced bottom-up or top-down, but influencers and Q themselves have the highest degree of narrative control. Community validation is central to this process, as it rewards the rank-and-file for participating and incentivizes influencers with the power it confers.
- **Coordinated link sharing and disinformation networks:** Some QAnon influencers coordinate with one another to boost messages that they believe might benefit them, either socially, financially, or for the good of the QAnon movement itself. This also ensures that influencers retain some control over the movement’s beliefs and strategies. It has not been proven, but there appears to be some circumstantial evidence to suggest that this coordination includes administrators of the 8kun platform, where Q posts.

ON-RAMPS AND OFF-RAMPS

On-ramps: Societal-Level Vulnerabilities (Macro-Level)

There are several societal-level vulnerabilities that have enhanced individual susceptibility to the QAnon-conspiracy. Legitimate concerns over child abuse and human trafficking create vulnerabilities to radicalization into the QAnon cult. The U.S., UK, Germany, and Belgium have all had major pedophilia and #metoo scandals over the past few years. In the U.S., these scandals were rooted in some of the most sacred and beloved religious and secular institutions: the Catholic church, the Boy Scouts, Hollywood, and our social elites. In the UK, revelations about Jimmy Savile's well-known history of abuse, and about Prince Andrew and his relationship with Jeffrey Epstein and Gislaine Maxwell have raised serious suspicions. When powerful individuals involved in these child-abuse scandals do not face consequences, ordinary people may retreat into fantasy as a way of doling out justice.¹⁸

On-ramps: Meso-Level Vulnerabilities (Group-Level)

Some communities and subcultures seem particularly prone to act as on-ramps to QAnon:

- **The wellness community:** Members of the wellness, natural health, alternative medicine, and yoga communities already tend to distrust the state, and express antipathy to traditional institutions and/or Western medicine. They are skeptical of authority and encourage one another to choose their own path. This makes them vulnerable to cranks and conspiracies like QAnon.
- **"Pastel" QAnon:** A new style of QAnon propaganda has recently emerged, which mimics the soft graphic design style of mommy blogs and crafting websites. This has proven a major on-ramp for women.
- **Mobilized moms and heroic men:** As stated above, the desire to save children from trafficking represents a strong motive for people to become involved with QAnon. This otherwise healthy desire has been co-opted as an on-ramp into the QAnon-conspiracy culture, such as through the "Save Our Children" movement, an ostensibly grassroots anti-trafficking and abuse movement that is in fact a front from QAnon groups.¹⁹
- **Militias:** Paramilitary organizations have begun to co-opt QAnon narratives. At the recent "Million MAGA March," protesters were heard chanting "Biden is a pedophile." Recent Q-associated propaganda frames belief in Q as patriotic, suggesting that disbelief in Q or working to combat Q is equivalent to being a traitor. The history of American patriot militia violence makes this a particularly troubling development.

On-ramps: Individual-Level Vulnerabilities

These ideological and emotional spaces can prime individuals for going down the QAnon rabbit hole:

- **Black-and-white thinking:** Individuals who are unable to cope with nuance or uncertainty are more likely to seek the certain answers and clear good/evil distinction offered by conspiracy theories like QAnon.

¹⁸ Lawrence, David & Davis, Gregory. QAnon in the UK: The Growth of a Movement. Hope Not Hate. <https://www.hopenothate.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/qanon-report-2020-10-FINAL.pdf>.

¹⁹ Associated Press. "QAnon's 'Save the Children' morphs into popular slogan," AP News. October 28, 2020. <https://apnews.com/article/election-2020-donald-trump-child-trafficking-illinois-morris-aab978bb7e9b89cd2cea151ca13421a0>.

- **Anxious and isolated parents:** Even before the pandemic, parenting in modern America could be extremely difficult. Today, family and community support are harder to come by, as increased work demands give middle class and working class families less time to spend together. Some parents will project their anxieties over parenthood and their children's future onto fantasies such as those provided by QAnon.
- **The unseen virus:** Individuals are isolated, grieving and facing traumatic health and economic stresses as a result of an invisible virus that, at the time of this writing, has already killed nearly 300,000 Americans. People lack a sense of control and are vulnerable to calls to fight a more tangible (even if fantastical or absurd) danger. Fighting child trafficking may give these individuals a sense of moral purpose, meaning, and a way to take action against a threat when they are unable to fight the very real threat they actually face.
- **Negative fixation on social justice movements:** Reactions to social justice movements in the United States have been a factor in a variety of forms of extremist mobilization in 2020. Indications are preliminary, but based on mobilization observed around Black Lives Matter protests, our research indicates that Q adherents are linking "social justice movements" to orchestration by 'elites' who aim to disempower the middle class. This creates the possibility that individuals who fixate negatively on social justice movements may be more vulnerable to QAnon rhetoric.

Off-ramps

Due to its recent arrival, there is little research into the pathways out of QAnon. However, there are some best practices that can be drawn from cult deprogramming and deradicalization. There is also cause for hope. The process of radicalization into QAnon is much more rapid than that of other cults and extremist groups. It may prove possible to draw individuals out of QAnon more quickly than is typical in cult and extremist scenarios.

- **Do not mock or ridicule:** Mockery has a demonstrated effect of reinforcing delusional beliefs.
- **Help the individual maintain contact with reality:** If it is safe, you may act as one person who provides the individual with an anchor in reality. This is an important factor in people leaving. People involved in cults and extremist milieus need to know that they will not be alone if they leave.
- **Exogenous shock:** People often leave cults and extremist groups when something major changes in their lives, such as becoming a parent or changing jobs. If such an opportunity arises, you might reach out to gently try drawing someone out of QAnon.
- **Disengage:** If possible, you might convince an individual to log off from social media. Some people naturally return to a stable perception of reality when removed from their echo chambers.
- **Disillusionment with group members:** When group members do not live up to their promises, or when leaders are exposed as con-artists, many people (though not all) will leave a cult or extremist group.

Above all, we must focus on the humanity of people caught up in QAnon. The QAnon-conspiracy movement thrives on dehumanization. Through compassion and patience, people may be drawn out.

QANON INFORMATION OPERATIONS: A QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS

In this section we perform quantitative analysis to demonstrate how QAnon’s disinformation operations attack specific pillars of democracy at strategic moments: from belief in democratic elections to trust in public health and public institutions. We examine how QAnon networks execute high-impact information operations on Twitter, showing how the conspiracy group amplifies anti-Jewish content into the mainstream both generally and during the recent social justice protests. In addition, we explore QAnon’s sophisticated influence operations using combinations of bot-like-networks and synchronous mass-posting behavior, termed “coordinated inauthentic behavior” a tactic which QAnon community members use with great success to hijack the national conversation. QAnon’s influence operations have successfully reached the White House’s Twitter feed²⁰ and others in political leadership. We demonstrate evidence of strong network to network feedback between QAnon networks and these accounts. With these tactics and with only a few thousand actors, QAnon reliably drives conspiratorial hashtags and narratives into top-trending terms internationally, both on social media, mainstream news-media and across prominent Twitter feeds.

Using hundreds of thousands of comments taken from Twitter, we employ a combination of timeline analyses and hashtag association analyses to explore QAnon’s behavior and detail high-impact efforts of the growing conspiracy group.

How QAnon attacks trust in public health and democratic institutions: vaccine disinformation, a deep state and a planned epidemic

QAnon-affiliated Twitter accounts often amplify anti-Jewish conspiracy theories that Jews are seeking to take over the world as members of a secret cabal of global elites. In the face of COVID-19 pandemic, members of the QAnon community promulgated anti-Jewish disinformation claiming that a secret cabal of Jewish, “globalist” elites, especially George Soros and the Rothschilds, along with Bill Gates and others sought to inject “microchips” along with vaccines to monitor people in order to take over the world. Other conspiracies claim that elites created and used the virus as a method of population control, to siphon money for private gain, and more.

The Jewish philanthropist George Soros is often a leading target to promote these antisemitic narratives. Fiona Hill, a former top-Russia analyst for the White House likened conspiracy theories linked to George Soros to “The Protocols of the Elders of Zion.”

The Network Contagion Research Institute conducted a hashtag frequency analysis on all comments containing the term “Soros” (excluding retweets) over five days in April and found the top associations for the term “Soros” to be associated with QAnon. Top associations include #QAnon, #WWG1WGA (where we go one, we go all), in addition to #BillGates and #Rothschild, (two favorite figures in conspiracies of deep-state world domination).

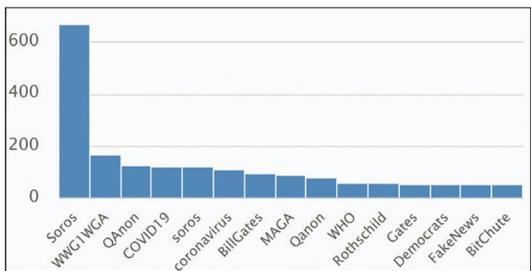
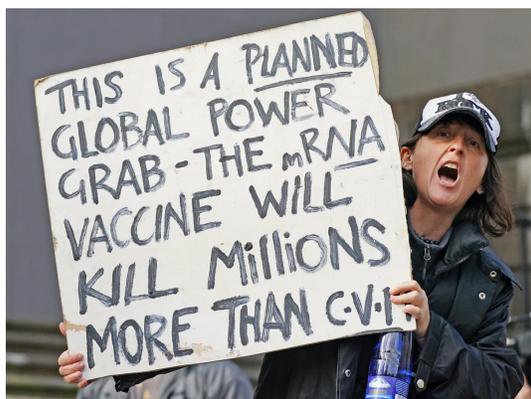


Fig 1. Top hashtags associated (retweets excluded) with Soros from 4/23/20 to 4/29/20 on Twitter show growing association with conspiracy around COVID-19. QAnon and associated hashtags were present in a majority of tweets pushing the anti-Jewish conspiracy theory

²⁰ Palmer, Ewan. “Donald Trump has Promoted QAnon-Linked Twitter Accounts More Than 250 Times,” Newsweek. October 16, 2020. <https://www.newsweek.com/qanon-trump-twitter-conspiracy-town-hall-pedophiles-1539698>.

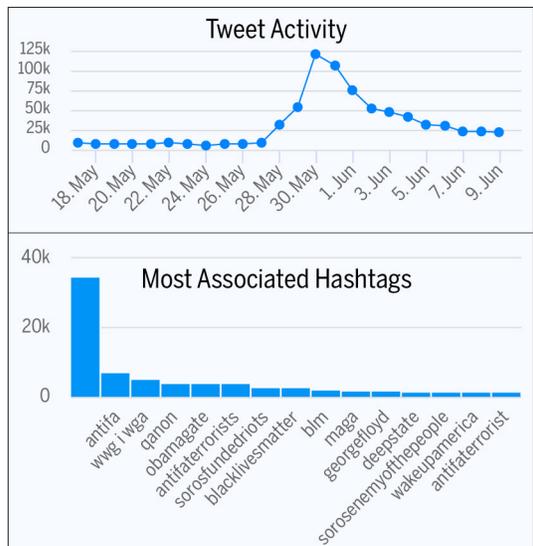
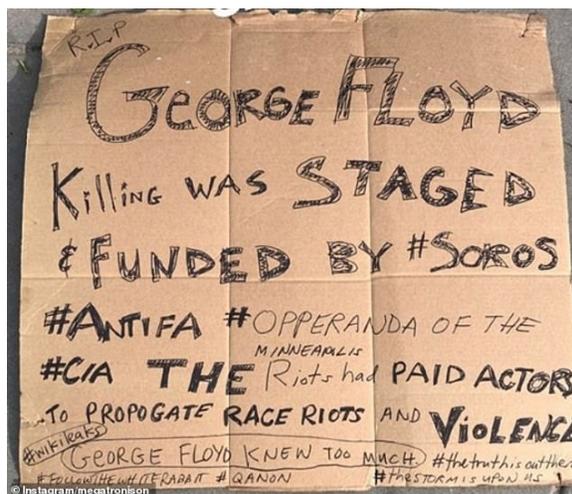


Fig 2. (Top) Timeline analysis of original tweets (excluding responses) using the term “Soros” on Twitter between May 17th and June 9th; 2020 show a surge of over 1000% in the use of the term. (Bottom) Hashtags associated with “Soros” suggest QAnon played a considerable role in amplifying disinformation regarding Soros. QAnon hashtags were the top associated hashtags with Soros tweets.

How QAnon attacks trust in our civic bonds: antisemitic disinformation: the social justice protests as a secret Jewish plot

Anti-Jewish disinformation about secret cabals of Jewish global elites reached its highest historic levels on Twitter in tandem with the Black Lives Matter protests in May. QAnon played a central role in promulgating these narratives. Theories amplified on Twitter often accused Soros of funding Antifa and BLM rioters as part of a plot to take over the country. NCRI’s timeline analysis of original tweets using the term “Soros” on Twitter from May 17th to June 9th show a surge of over 1000%, in use of the term “Soros.” Hashtag frequency analysis suggests that QAnon played a considerable role in pushing this disinformation. Hashtags such as #WWG1WGA, #QAnon, and #Obamagate were among the top hashtags associated with the term “Soros.”



Above: (Left) real world and (Right) online Q-related protest materials depict QAnon conspiracies about Soros murdering George Floyd and inducing revolutionary violence through secret control of both BLM and Antifa.

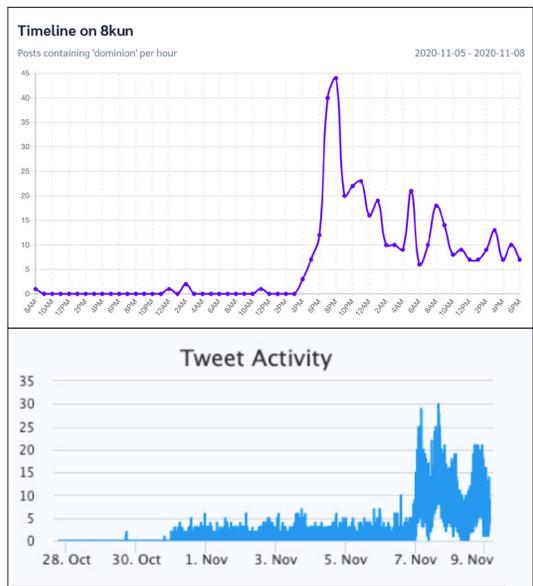


Fig 3. (Top) Timeline analysis using the term "Dominion" on 8kun between November 5th and November 8th, 2020. (Bottom) Timeline analysis of the term "Dominion" (excluding retweets) between October 28th and November 10th, 2020. Term activity on Twitter prior to November 7th was not related to Dominion theory.



How QAnon attacks trust in democratic elections: election disinformation (dominion)

In the days following the election, conspiracy theories alleging Dominion Voting Systems, an election-software company, began circulating within the QAnon movement. According to the unfounded theory, Dominion software switched votes from President Trump to President-elect Joe Biden. The theory began circulating on 4chan and 8kun, the fringe-message board that hosts QAnon, on November 6th, and then migrated to Twitter later that evening. According to an analysis from Advance Democracy that was conducted for NBC News, one in seven tweets using hashtag #Dominion from November 5th to November 17th were from accounts that self-identified as QAnon supporters.²¹ On November 7th, verified right-wing Twitter accounts like Charlie Kirk and Sara A. Carter amplified the Dominion conspiracy theory. On November 8th, the theory was amplified on Twitter by Jim Hoft of the Gateway Pundit, Chuck Woolery, and others.

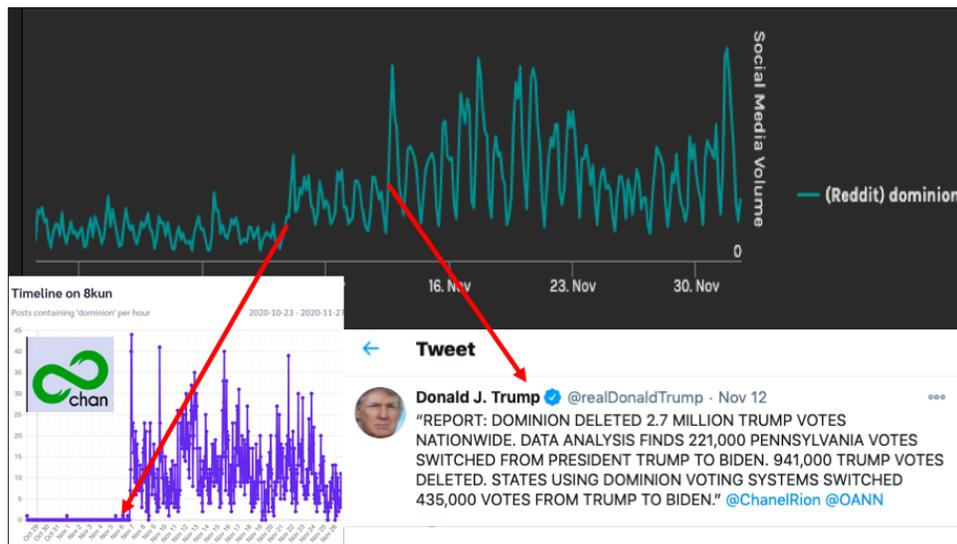
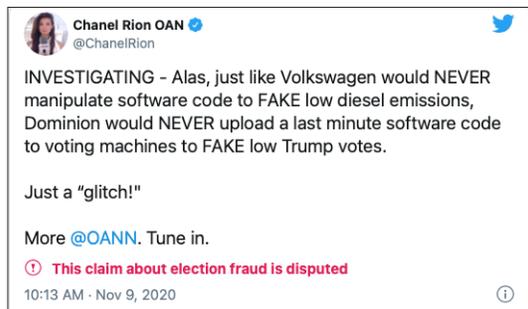


Fig 4. Disinformation on the Dominion election fraud conspiracy, starts on 8chan (8kun), a site hosted by Jim Watkins and home to QAnon's encrypted missives and escalates across right wing media influencer accounts and media sites like OANN and into the White House Twitter feed. This process reliably escalates the prevalence of the conspiracy onto mainstream sites like Twitter and Reddit (Above) at each step.

The far-right news outlet One America News Network started circulating the theory on November 9th. On November 12th, President Trump amplified the theory on Twitter by citing a *One America News Network* report.

21 Collins, Ben. "QAnon's Dominion Voter Fraud Conspiracy Theory Reaches the President." NBCNews.com, NBCUniversal News Group, 13 Nov. 2020, www.nbcnews.com/tech/tech-news/q-fades-qanon-s-dominion-voter-fraud-conspiracy-theory-reaches-n1247780.



On November 19th, President Trump tweeted out a video segment from One America News Network that claimed to uncover “shocking vulnerabilities” in Dominion Voting software. The video segment introduced Ron Watkins to support the theory. Ron Watkins is a former administrator of the 8kun website (formerly 8chan) and is the son of Jim Watkins, the owner of 8kun. Many experts believe that Jim Watkins and Ron Watkins are involved in Q’s postings on 8kun, and may have created QAnon.²²

A deep dive into a QAnon information operation: how QAnon networks and the White House signal to one another during high-profile disinformation operations

The interplay of QAnon accounts, right-wing-media influencers and the White House show raises a question: would evidence of this network-to-network contact signify cryptic communication between these layers? Is there coordination between QAnon-disinformation networks to perpetuate fraudulent disinformation?

To examine this question, the NCRI dissected information operations around 2 hashtags on Twitter that both trended in early May: #obamagate, and #subpoenaobama, both of which appeared to attract significant efforts by Q-related networks and appeared on the White House Twitter feed.

#Obamagate Disinformation Campaign

Obamagate was a prevalent conspiracy theory pushed by QAnon accounts, right-wing influencers, and President Donald Trump in May. The Obamagate hashtag surfaced on May 10th, accumulating over two million tweets by the end of May 11th, and another four million tweets by the end of the week. According to research by Alex Kaplan, a researcher at Media Matter, #Obamagate originated on QAnon Twitter. The NCRI conducted a hashtag frequency analysis and found a majority of hashtags associated with #Obamagate are QAnon associated hashtags, which suggests the movement played a key role in spreading the conspiracy theory.

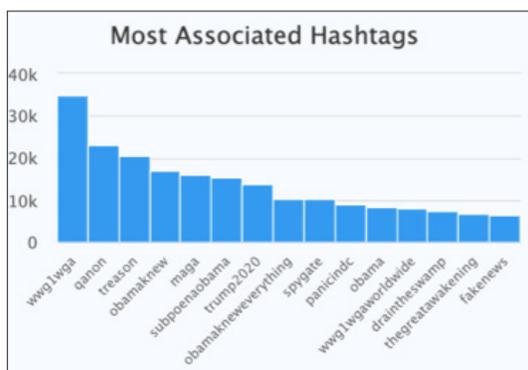


Fig 5. Top hashtags associated (retweets excluded) “Obamagate” include #wwg1wga, #qanon., #thegreatawakening, and other QAnon-associated hashtags.

22 Franciscani, Chris. “The Men behind QAnon.” ABC News, ABC News Network, 22 Sept. 2020, abcnews.go.com/Politics/men-qanon/story?id=73046374.

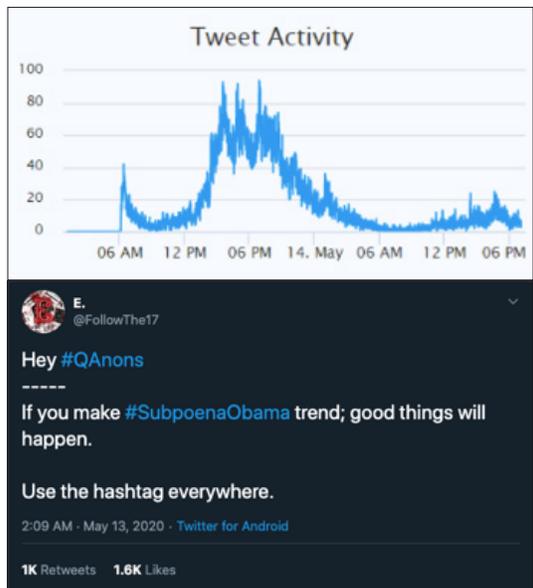


Fig 6. (Top) Timeline analysis of original tweets (excluding responses) using the term “subpoenaobama.” On May 13th at 2:09 a.m. EST, NCRI tracked a spike of #subpoenaobama started by @followthe17. (Bottom) The original tweet by @followthe17.

Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior Amplified #SubpoenaObama

According to Nathaniel Gleicher, head of Cyber Security Policy at Facebook, “coordinated inauthentic behavior is when groups of pages or people work together to mislead others about who they are and what they are doing.” Groups of accounts or pages engaging in “coordinated inauthentic behavior” attempt to influence people for political or financial gain, while hiding their identity. This phenomenon has become very prevalent on social media, and evidence suggests pro-QAnon accounts may have engaged in this behavior to push conspiracies from the fringes to the President’s Twitter feed.

Similar to the #Obamagate tag, an in-depth look into the subsequent #subpoenaObama tag highlights how, under the banner of QAnon, coordinated inauthentic behavior produces non-factual narratives and circulates them from the fringes to the mainstream.

At 2:09 a.m. EST on May 13th, 2020, the account @followthe17 first posts the hashtag #subpoenaObama, followed by another tweet at 2:09 a.m., “Hey #QAnons, If you make #subpoenaObama trend; good things will happen. Use the hashtag everywhere.” This account is a QAnon-affiliated one, given that 17 stands for the 17th letter of the alphabet, Q. Still at 2:09 a.m., other QAnon-affiliated accounts, identifiable by Qs in their profile pictures or usernames, shared the tag and encouraged their followers to keep the tag going in order to get it to trend. Using Pushshift, NCRI was able to see that the tag usage developed in a fashion consistent with inorganic behavior, as it jumped from zero to 42 tweets in the same minute. Rapid spikes such as this are often indicators of coordinated inauthentic behavior.

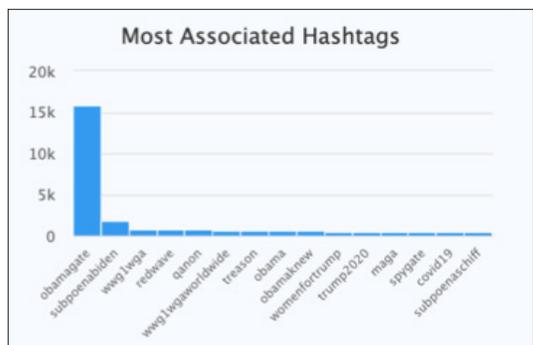
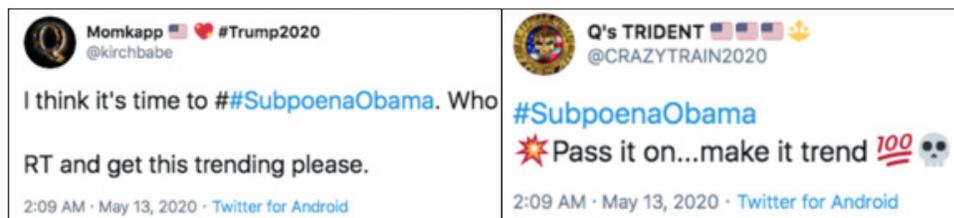


Fig 7. Top hashtags associated (retweets excluded) with #subpoeobama include #obamagate, #subpoenabiden, #wwg1wga, #qanon, and #wwg1wga worldwide.



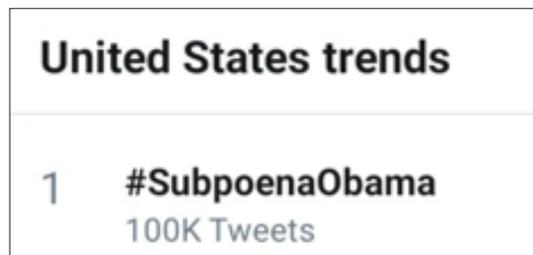
QAnon-affiliated Twitter accounts amplified the hashtag on May 13th at 2:09 a.m. EST.

A look at the first hundred accounts to share the #subpoenaObama tag after it was initiated by @followthe17 (the central node of this operation) further confirms the role of QAnon in spreading disinformation into the mainstream. NCRI found that amongst those users, the phrase WWGIWGA appears 34 times; the letter Q and words QAnon and QArmy appear 41 times; the Great Awakening appears eight times, and Trump appears 42 times.

NCRI was able to determine which hashtags were most associated with the #subpoenaObama tag. Notably, #Obamagate came in first and is another example of a QAnon amplified tag. Other tags were also associated with QAnon, such as #wwg1wga and #qanon. This shows a strong link between the QAnon community and this conspiracy theory.



Verified accounts using #SubpoenaObama shortly after the hashtag was created and amplified by QAnon-affiliated accounts.



#SubpoenaObama was momentarily the top trending hashtag on Twitter in the United States.



@FollowThe17 winking to his followers after President Trump echoes a narrative that was inauthentically created and amplified by QAnon accounts.

The hashtag was amplified throughout the 13th and 14th of May, at times being tweeted roughly 4,000 times an hour. The hashtag, which was the top trending hashtag in the United States, made its way from obscure QAnon-affiliated accounts to verified users such as conservative pundit Glenn Beck, Diamond and Silk, and Ryan Fournier in a matter of hours.

Later that evening, the President of the United States, Donald Trump, used his personal Twitter account to convey the sentiment of the tag just hours after the original use of the tag. The tweet asks Senator Lindsey Graham, the chair of the Senate Judicial Committee, to subpoena former President Obama to testify about his role in this alleged scandal. @Followthe17, the central node in the QAnon network promoting the hashtag, retweeted the President's tweet, adding a winky face emoji (;)) and a screenshot of the original tweet promising good things if QAnoners amplified the tag.



President Trump asking Lindsay Graham to subpoena former President Barack Obama on May 14th.

This timeline illustrates how the QAnon movement is uniquely capable of gaming online communication and its narratives. To the President, the #subpoenaObama tag might merely have directed attention to his political opponent. But to dedicated QAnoners, his expressed support of the tag was seen as having coded significance. This further legitimized the movement while also encouraging its adherents to engage in coordinated inauthentic behavior to push conspiracy theories to the forefront of the national conversation.

Late evening on May 14th, the President thanked his great "keyboard warriors."



President Trump asking Lindsay Graham to subpoena former President Barack Obama on May 14th.

CONCLUSIONS

This report is an agenda-setting one, meaning that it offers initial analysis that points to the need for serious engagement on the issue. Above all, it is clear that QAnon is a phenomenon worthy of serious empirical analysis, global tracking, and large-scale intervention. Our analysis here suggests that the potential for channels of cryptic, network-to-network signals appears to exist. If indeed extant, channels such as these would allow for tight coordination between QAnon-disinformation networks and major political figures in perpetrating fraudulent disinformation while permitting plausible deniability.

As QAnon-disinformation became more pervasive, Facebook and Twitter responded by banning QAnon accounts, pages, groups, and hashtags.²³ This has led Q-related networks to migrate to alternative information ecosystems where disinformation is moderated less freely.²⁴ The largest, and fastest growing of these is Parler, a site which received investment by the Mercer family, one of the largest donors to the 2016 Trump campaign, and key investors in Cambridge Analytica.²⁵

What comes next?

It is impossible to predict definitely what will happen over the coming months, particularly after the administration changes hands. But hundreds of millions of dollars are now raised on conspiracy narratives about election fraud. Many of these narratives originate on 8chan and are supported by QAnon-conspiracy networks.²⁶ Powerful political and financial networks can now support the migration of Q into an entirely separate, potentially lucrative, satellite-media-community to secure influence and unleash perpetual disinformation into the political ecosystem. As some Q-sympathetic politicians leave office and others enter, the potential for more ever-more coordinated manipulation expands.

What can be done?

Actionable response based on this report's analysis could take several forms. First and foremost, we need sustained, public-private funding to underwrite non-partisan, empirically-rigorous analysis and testable interventions to prevent the growth of disinformation networks and the spread and transformation of conspiracy theories on an ongoing basis. This work must extend beyond the borders of the U.S. in order to understand both the ways that American conspiracy theories like QAnon have spread globally, and to develop critical analyses and preventative capacity for state and non-state actors overseas to introduce, amplify, or distribute disinformation and misinformation for their own nefarious purposes. We need public awareness, including among first-line responders in law enforcement, intelligence, and public health agencies, and information-sharing channels that can rapidly connect what we are learning about disinformation networks with crises in other areas, including vaccine hesitancy and mobilization to extremist violence or terrorism. Finally, we need strategies for political coalition-building that help draw the line in the sand that will prevent conspiracies and disinformation from taking hold among public officials and other powerful administrators and leaders.

²³ Collins, Ben, and Brandy Zadrozny. "Facebook Bans QAnon across Its Platforms." NBCNews.com, NBCUniversal News Group, 6 Oct. 2020, www.nbcnews.com/tech/tech-news/facebook-bans-qanon-across-its-platforms-n1242339.

²⁴ Jasser, Greta. "The Social Media Platform That Welcomes QAnon with Open Arms." OpenDemocracy, 19 Nov. 2020, www.opendemocracy.net/en/countering-radical-right/social-media-platform-welcomes-qanon-open-arms.

²⁵ "Social Media Platform Parler Gets Backing from Mercer Family - WSJ." Reuters, Thomson Reuters, 15 Nov. 2020, www.reuters.com/article/parler-funding-mercero/social-media-platform-parler-gets-backing-from-mercero-family-wsj-idUSKBN27V020.

²⁶ Collins, Ben. "QAnon's Dominion Voter Fraud Conspiracy Theory Reaches the President." NBCNews.com, NBCUniversal News Group, 13 Nov. 2020, www.nbcnews.com/tech/tech-news/q-fades-qanon-s-dominion-voter-fraud-conspiracy-theory-reaches-n1247780.